

Australian Catholic University (ACU)

A New Learning and Teaching Institute

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the grants, fellowships and awards and other programmes delivered by the OLT?

Australian Catholic University (ACU) wishes firstly to acknowledge and express its support for the vital work and initiatives undertaken to promote and support the enhancement of learning and teaching in the Australian higher education sector, currently administered under the auspices of the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT). The initiatives and programmes delivered by the OLT have served to nurture, encourage and reward outstanding teaching across the sector. They have also provided important support and encouragement towards the development of innovative learning and teaching practices in Australia's universities. The continuation of this work is essential to delivering quality higher education to students, and to ensuring that graduates are effectively imparted with the necessary knowledge and skills to better serve the community and contribute to national advancement. It is also essential to building the international reputation of Australia's higher education sector, and positioning it as a global leader in higher education provision through recognised excellence in learning and teaching practices.

ACU makes the following observations and points of feedback when reflecting on the programmes and initiatives delivered and supported by the OLT to date, in the hope that these will feed into the present consultation process and in the establishment of a new learning and teaching institute:

- Commissioned works - ACU would question the value of commissioned works administered by the OLT. It is worth reflecting that across the range of programmes that the OLT administers there has arisen a significant number of projects and initiatives. Whilst many of these may be considered to be sufficiently strategic and 'big picture' to have a national and, very often international, importance, ACU feels that greater consideration needs to be given to the identification of the 'areas of focus' that can (or should) inform the application process, as well as to the identification of the people who will determine which of the proposals would be deemed worthy of progressing to funding of some description.
- Fellowships - Fellowships are critical in providing pedagogical and scholarship leadership across the sector and are a valuable resource for universities. ACU strongly believes that they should be preserved.
- National Teaching Awards - The National Teaching Awards provide a moderated recognition system for good teachers who inspire and encourage others. These awards should also be kept.
- Required deliverables of OLT projects and programmes - As noted above, there now exists a very real opportunity to reflect upon whether the current expectation and deliverables required by the OLT are those that are believed will best assist the Australian higher education sector in maintaining its existing reputation for a quality higher education learning experience, and ensure that this remains the case into the future. It is noted that the OLT has recently started to seek some form of 'impact

assessment' of projects to be produced. This comment is made to address the current requirement to demonstrate impact which it is felt is too often met with the development of a website or publishing of papers and conference presentations to demonstrate dissemination, as opposed to impact data from universities in which particular learning and teaching projects are trialled. It is also suggested that a part of the future dissemination could include a succinct evaluation guide that would assist other universities that might wish to replicate a particular project that had been successful. This would, in turn, better support the trialling of new initiatives in individual universities and make available a resource which would enable successful initiatives to be rolled out to other universities if desired.

Particular comment should also be made with respect to funding. The new Institute has been allocated \$28 million in funding and this is a significant reduction in the funding previously allocated to support the activities of the OLT (in the vicinity of \$131 million). If the institute is to effectively execute its mandate to promote excellence in teaching and learning in the higher education sector, it will be necessary to ensure that it is afforded sufficient funding.

Another significant issue that will need to be addressed, especially in a strained fiscal environment, is the mechanism by which funding will be distributed across the different levels of grants, awards and programmes that are currently administered by the OLT. Detailed consideration will need to be given to how best to allocate a relatively small pool of limited funding across a sector comprising 39 universities. For instance, whether to spread funding more thinly across existing programmes or target funding to specific programmes will need to be addressed.

What can be learned from the past experience of predecessor bodies and equivalent international organisations to assist the development a new programme, within and across fields of study, for leading the promotion of learning and teaching in the sector?

ACU makes the following suggestions, based on observations and past experience, to assist with the development of a new programme, within and across fields of study, for leading the promotion of learning and teaching in the sector:

- It will be important for the new institute to have a broad base of university assessors to evaluate the institute's grants, awards and programmes. This is necessary to equip the institute with the requisite expertise to assess learning and teaching initiatives across a range of fields of study and across different types of programmes and projects.
- The programme of grants and awards should give the opportunity for early career and more established academics to develop their scholarship of learning and teaching and to demonstrate increasingly sophisticated innovation and project leadership.
- Standards Framework – There is a good opportunity for the new institute to ground the promotion of learning and teaching in the sector on the *Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards Framework*, which was funded by the OLT and has been trialled by five Western Australian universities (project leaders) and selected Australian universities and is the subject of a current successful OLT Fellowship application.¹ The framework is informed by an extensive evidence base and consultation and provides a

¹ Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards Framework at <http://uniteachingcriteria.edu.au/framework/about/>

“practical and flexible guide for clarifying what constitutes quality teaching and how it can be evidenced” in an accessible format for universities and their academic staff.² The Standards Framework could be utilised by a new institute to articulate Australian teaching standards and to assist with the assessment of teaching awards and grants administered by the institute.

- The new institute should emphasise a requirement or explore avenues to ensure that application proposals submitted for learning and teaching grants and programmes are the original work of the relevant researcher(s). There is some concern as to whether a practice has developed in some institutions of applications being written by ‘professional’ writers or teams. It is considered that such an approach could distort the proposals of the individual researchers. It is important that the institute ensures that the applications that are being considered for funding are an accurate reflection of the intent and ‘voice’ of the applicant.

What are the opportunities for fostering engagement, innovation, enhanced quality and leading excellence in learning and teaching through a new institute?

ACU would suggest that the focus should be on opportunities for fostering *strategic* engagement, innovation, enhanced quality and leading excellence in learning and teaching through the new institute. That is, the word “strategic” should be inserted before “engagement” in this question.

It is important that opportunities that are pursued through a new institute to enhance learning and teaching are:

- Aligned to specific strategic goals articulated by the new institute, and clearly demonstrate how they will further these goals and add real value to articulated objectives.
- These strategic goals will need to be clearly articulated. ACU considers that they should be:
 - Developed in consultation with the sector.
 - Forward thinking and encompass opportunities to pursue international collaboration and outreach. For instance, there are good outreach and commercial opportunities overseas (particularly in Asia for example) that can be explored, where Australian learning and teaching practices could be shared and/or collaboratively developed to enhance learning and teaching practices and lift educational outcomes.
 - Promote innovation in learning and teaching practices which is needed to support and drive economic growth through quality higher education and the production of high quality graduates.

ACU believes that at the university level there is (or should be) an established expectation that students will be taught by teachers who are at the least ‘scholarly informed’ in their teaching practice, and preferably are actively engaged as ‘scholars of learning and teaching’. They should be more than just ‘good’ teachers, they should be great teachers. A new institute should support this across all levels and universities in the higher education sector by promoting opportunities to enhance the teaching and learning practices of university teachers, through active promotion of the scholarship of teaching, appropriate recognition, and reward. It is important that a new

² Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards Framework at <http://uniteachingcriteria.edu.au/>

institute actively works to foster a culture of well-informed teaching and learning in the university sector.

Please provide comments on any other matters of interest, such as governance arrangements.

It will be important to ensure that the new institute operates as an all-inclusive university sector institute, to support its objectives to promote excellence in learning and teaching across the sector in all Australian universities. There should be a level playing field to allow all institutions equal access and prospects of winning learning and teaching grants. For instance, one option might be to engage Universities Australia (UA) as the peak representative body of the sector to recommend a panel (perhaps on a rotational basis) that governs the processes around the distribution of awards.

ACU considers that with respect to governance arrangements, it is important to ensure that all universities are involved. However, administration would more efficiently be handled by one university. A single university should be tasked to house and provide secretariat support for the institute and to the assessment panels. This secretariat would conduct the institute's awards ceremonies, monitor the project outcomes of funded projects, and also administer the institute website.